

# Isolationism in the united states from 1919-1941

Countries, United States



To what extent was the United States isolationist from 1919-1941? From 1919-1941 the US advocated its isolationism. However, as such a large and economically influential nation it could not be truly isolationist and did take part in some international affairs during the period. The extent to which the nation was isolationist varied throughout the period. One can clearly state that in 1919 support for isolationism was extremely strong but was near completely extinguished by 1942. After the First World War and partly as a reaction to it, there existed a strong isolationist sentiment among the American people. Forgetting the domestic social reform of the Progressive era many Americans resented its interventionist stance and wished to go back to the isolationist foreign policy of the Gilded Age. In 1920, President Harding called this going back to 'normalcy'. "America's present need is not heroics but healing, not nostrums but normalcy, not revolution but restoration .... not submergence in internationality but sustainment in triumphant nationality." Due to this attitude and the need to satisfy it, the US government presented itself as isolationist during the period and was limited in the extent of its intervention in foreign affairs. Public acts of withdrawal from international affairs in the 1920s quieted the call for isolationism at home, such as its refusal to join the League of Nations or the International Court of Justice (in 1922 and 1927), failure to ratify the Treaty of Versailles and other isolationist policy like the restrictions on immigration and raised tariffs on European goods. Although the United States appeared isolationist in the 1920s it cannot be called truly isolationist as policy remained interventionist over some issues. Although it did not join the League of Nations it worked closely with them especially over humanitarian issues. It

also instigated and signed the Kellogg-Briande Pact in 1928 along with 63 other nations, outlawing war. Further more, Interventionism was continued where it was most convenient; in regard to colonial interests, trade opportunities, ensuring peace overseas and the repayment of foreign debt. Although President Harding claimed ' we see no part in directing the destinies of the world', it seems that a foreign policy of interventionism was needed in directing the destiny of the United States that was a different matter. Colonial interests were claimed in Alaska, the Philipines, Central America and Hawaii. In 1921 it signed the Four Power Treaty with Britain, France and Japan and then the Nine Power Treaty agreeing to respect China's independence but allowing them equal trading rights and so the ability to abuse China's economy. In order to settle the debt of the European nations negotiations were held and resulted in the Dawes Plan 1924 and the 1929 Young Plan. The Unites States desired peace overseas so that it would not have to spend on arms, interventionism was therefore convenient and led to the Washington conference 1921-22 creating a fixed size for the navies of leading nations. From 1919-1930 the US claimed isolationism but most of its foreign policy reflected an uninhibited return to interventionism were it was deemed necessary or just convenient. Isolationism, however, came to the fore in the US during the early and mid 1930s. Although President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who presided over most of the decade, saw the impracticality of isolationism for such an economically influential nation his attention was taken away from foreign policy and dominated by domestic issues because of the Great Depression. As the president was focused on alleviating the effects of the depression he allowed most foreign policy to be

determined by the republican-dominated congress whose support he needed in passing the New Deal reforms. The congress reflected the isolationist sentiment of the general American public. Roosevelt noted in 1935, ' we face a large and misinformed public opinion'. For these reasons the 1930s saw the peak of isolationist foreign policy in the United States. In 1934 the Nye Committee decided that America's involvement in the First World War was a result of the greed of bankers and munitions makers who would profit from it. This resulted in the isolationist Neutrality Acts created from 1935-37 aimed at preventing America from becoming involved in another war. These acts began by prohibiting the use of US ships to transport munitions to other countries at war and became the ' cash and carry' policy where nations at war could buy US products, excluding munitions, as long as they paid cash and provided their own ships. American isolationist sentiment and its power over policy during the 1930s, as historian David M. Kennedy says ' political isolationism straightjacketed American diplomacy', is exemplified by the reaction to Roosevelt's Quarantine Speech in 1937. As he had just been inaugurated Roosevelt felt free to make an attempt at breaking the isolationist sentiment. In this speech Roosevelt tried to convince the American public of the necessity of collective security and of the US's responsibility to take action to prevent the spread of war. He was highly criticised. The isolationists had power in the congress and so the presidents' need to pass further social reforms forced him to back away from the issue. By the outbreak of war in Europe the US slowly returned to interventionism and by the end of 1941 isolationism was gone from US foreign policy. The end of the decade saw the gradual degradation of the public isolationist

sentiment. The American people understood that America could not remain neutral in the war in Europe seen in a 1939 opinion poll showing that 84% of the population wanted an allied victory, compared with only 14% with no opinion. This change was also recognised by congress as in September of 1940 they granted \$10. 5 Billion for Roosevelt to spend on arms, after rejecting his request for \$2 Billion earlier that year. From 1939-1941 the United States were in no way isolationist although the sentiment was still prevalent. President Roosevelt was, as many isolationists claimed, speaking of peace but planning for war as American policy grew progressively interventionist. In 1939 the irony of the title of the Neutrality Acts became clear as they were revised so the allies were able to buy arms on a ' cash and carry' basis. Late 1940 conscription or ' the draft' was introduced and the ' Destroyers for Bases' deal was made between Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Churchill. By 1941 America Britain was completely broke and standing alone against the Axis and it is at this time that the US becomes the ' Arsenal of Democracy' supplying Britain with rearmaments through the ' lend lease' program. The passing of the ' lend lease bill' was the last real parliamentary stand for the isolationists, the interventionists winning the debate and passing the bill 60: 31. Finally in August 1941 Roosevelt and Churchill meet to create The Atlantic Charter, which was nominally a list of ' common principles' but highly resembled a list of war aims. While these new interventionist movements were being made isolationist sentiment was still strong and manifest itself in the America First Committee, which was highly critical of Roosevelt's ' war mongering'. By 1941 American foreign policy and action had turned away completely from isolationism. For many American's

however isolationist sentiment remained the 7th of December 1941 with the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour. The attack of the homeland and destruction of American lives, arms and soil united the people in nationalism and banished any remembrance of isolationism. Therefore by the end of 1941 the United States were in policy and sentiment completely non-isolationist.